

## **Inquiry-based practice**

### **What is inquiry?**

Inquiry can be undertaken individually, but it is most powerful when it is collaborative.

Inquiry is a way of reflecting on professional practice.

I understand inquiry to be a process of systematic, rigorous and critical reflection about professional practice, and the contexts in which it occurs, in ways that question taken-for-granted assumptions. Its purpose is to inform decision-making for action. Inquiry can be undertaken individually, but it is most powerful when it is collaborative. It involves educators pursuing their “wonderings” (Hubbard & Power, 1993), seeking answers to questions or puzzles that come from real-world observations and dilemmas.

*Reid, 2004, page 3*

In exploring systematic, rigorous, and critical areas of reflection, Reid (2004) says that there are three major “moments” when inquiry can be undertaken. If the purpose of inquiry is to inform decision making for action, then the third moment is a critical one. The moments are:

- *Reflection-in-action* (Schön, 1983) is the process of drawing on ingrained, “tacit” knowledge to make spontaneous decisions about events as they happen.
- *Reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983) is the reflection that takes place when contemplating an action or after an action is taken.
- *Reflection-for-action* (Killon and Todnew, 1991) draws together the other two inquiry “moments” as the educator makes decisions about future action on the basis of what happened during a particular event and the reflection that occurred afterwards.

Inquiry enhances our capacity to learn. Stoll, Fink, and Earl (2003) say that another kind of reflection is meta-learning – learning about your own learning.

By asking them to review their experiences of learning, focusing at each stage on their *purpose*, *strategy*, the *effects*, their *feelings* and the *context*, the adult learner can review his or her learning, learn about the learning and apply what they have learnt to their future learning.

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Reid (2004) explains that inquiry is more than a technical activity, focused on how to make existing practices more efficient. It also has two other important dimensions.

The first – a conceptual dimension – involves educators analysing the reasons for actions taken, such as examining the theory behind their practices and exploring alternatives. And the second – a critical dimension – involves justifying what is done in relation to the moral,

ethical and socio-political issues associated with practice and looking at the external forces and broader social conditions that frame it, in order to gain greater understanding (Farrell, 2004). Critical forms of inquiry are centred on a commitment to equity and social justice.

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According to Reid, inquiry should be “a way of professional being”.

Educators who are inquirers will never announce that they ‘do’ inquiry, thus separating the activity from their professional being. Rather they might describe how they work – that is, the ways in which they inquire into their professional practice and how they are always striving to develop and expand their capacity to inquire.

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The fundamental purpose of inquiry in education is to make decisions about practice that will help raise student outcomes. These decisions include those about what educators need to learn and do in order to promote students’ learning and well-being.

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